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# Books of The Times

An Empire to Win In a Birchbark Canoe

*THE FIST IN THE WILDERNESS. By David Lavender. 490 pages. With maps by Palacios. Doubleday. \$5.95.*

**B**LUE beads from Venice. Whisky from all over. The accordion-pleated ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte. All had their parts in the eternal expansion of the United States.

There is a genial and honorable theory that our way westward was inspired by the need for new lands to accommodate the millions

of people landing in endless multitudes on our shores. But before that phase set in the trailsthrough lands that Britain and Spain also claimed were blazed by a fistful of curiously internationalized men. In "The Fist in the Wilderness" David Lavender dramatizes a remarkably fiery epoch in our history. The buckskinned diplomatists who sold Venetian beads and atrociously cut



David Lavender

whisky and any number of other portable if not potable things to the Indians in barter for furs went long periods without knowing precisely what nation's sovereignty was being trampled or enforced.

Napoleon, in the early 19th-century period on which "The Fist in the Wilderness" centers, first took the immeasurable Louisiana Territory away from Spain in a secret treaty—then he sold it to Thomas Jefferson's young American Republic after some very private negotiations in Paris.

Nor were the boundaries of the United States below and beyond the Great Lakes after our War of Independence from Britain miraculously clear and agreeable to all, anyway. Who had the definitive maps? No one. Who, among the fur traders of the United States, Spain, Britain, would willingly give up rights won through cloudily eminent domain?

Then, on top of all that, there were wars and alliances of Indian tribes. And in the midst of the bosky wilderness dishevelment, the incidence of the War of 1812 stirred fresh tumult.

No wonder Mr. Lavender says: "This is a difficult story to launch." It is indeed. But, once launched, it is rich in revelations and adventures and surprises.

For dominant patterns in his carpet he uses the hairy story of John Jacob Astor's

fur dealings ("In one triumphant *single day* in New York, Astor sold upwards of half a million muskrat hides") and his far-flung lieutenants. The farthest-flung lieutenant here is Ramsay Crooks, an awfully big wheel in the Astor fur business.

If you remember Mr. Lavender's classic "Bent's Fort," the story of Southwestern hunters, trappers and scouts in our history, you will see that in "The Fist in the Wilderness" he somewhat similarly uses the great voyageurs crossroads of Mackinack Island as a narrative base. But before the story is over we have shared parts of Lewis and Clark's incomparable expedition, endured the triumph-in-defeat of approaching Astoria by land and by sea and spent an invigorating lot of time in St. Louis, a wonderful town where old families became dominant long before the frontier was tamed. In that flourishing society you could just about manage to be a Spanish citizen one day, French citizen the next, and an American a few days later. Let today's international set try to match that.

Mr. Lavender is a great one for going to original sources, and, as he punctiliously acknowledges, original sources are as rich in discrepancies as deep-dish political analyses before and after a national election.

But the magnificent sprawling story comes through. The Briton, the Spaniard, the Indian, the American, the Frenchman—within their capacities for profitable destruction—plundered the wilderness as shockingly as bulldozers do in our time. On a much smaller scale, of course—though for higher stakes in the destinies of men and nations.